

News Letter

OF THE

CONFERENCE ON LITERATURE & PSYCHOLOGY OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

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The value of literature, history and mythology in the study of human nature was one of the "discoveries" of Freud and his successors in psychoanalytic psychology. Freud, in fact, stated that while his psychology began as a therapeutic procedure, he wanted men to know of it for the truth it contained about what was of the greatest importance to mankind, namely man's own nature.

Literature since psychoanalysis may be justly said to have been written with its teachings in mind, rather than as an independent inquiry into psychology, normal and abnormal. Yet the poet and literary artist have been able in all times, by virtue of their characteristic intuitive psychology, to explore the human soul. This is the mark of their genius.

William J. Ford, M. D.

—Lord Jim: Conrad's Study in Depth Psychology

In his recent book Freud or Jung [Norton, New York - 1950] the eminent British psychoanalyst Dr. Edward Glover deplores some of the attempts that have been made to procure a synthesis between dynamic psychology and the study of various manifestations of modern culture, particularly literature. The average psychoanalyst, he says, is not qualified for the job because "he has neither the cultural feelings nor the type of education necessary to pursue these matters beyond the limits of his professional vision." On the other hand he proclaims, "Unfortunately such non-analytical writers as have the necessary cultural background seldom possess the technical qualifications which would justify their taking the law into their own hands." [Both quotations from page 12.]

Now the very existence of this NEWS LETTER and of the Conference on Literature and Psychology is evidence of the fact that there are some students of literature and some practitioners of psychological medicine and clinical psychology who believe that the synthesis is possible without making inordinate demands on either of the two groups. Hitherto our short notes and articles have been the work of the first group. How far that group has transcended the limitations of their special "cultural background" it is not for us to say. In the present issue, however, we are fortunate in having a contribution from a member of the second group. Dr. William J. Ford is an active practicing psychiatrist in Chicago, a member of the faculty of the Department of Medicine of the Northwestern University Medical School. There is no need of encomium on our part to make plain how thoroughly he has mastered the techniques of intelligent literary criticism. To the readers of the following article on Thomas Mann's Doktor Faustus we recommend reading of Dr. Ford's paper on Lord Jim, from which our headnote is taken. It is to be found in the Quarterly Bulletin of the Northwestern Medical School, 1950, Vol. 24, No. 1, pages 64 et seq., Spring Quarter.

A NOTE ON HANS CASTORP

Two views of THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN encourage dissent: the repeated discussion of Hans and the novel in terms of vaguely-defined death, and second, the idea that Hans was an average young engineer who somehow came under a spell at the mountain tuberculosis resort. It can be shown that Hans wove his own enchantment—this out of his own character and his own interpretation of experience.

Hans Castorp, twenty-three in 1907 as the story opens, had been born in northern Germany of a well-to-do family. He was a tender product of a sheltered life [3]*, had passed engineering examinations and accepted a job[4] with a shipbuilding firm, to be begun after his three-week visit to his cousin Joachim Ziemssen, ill with tuberculosis. Hans loves wine, music, fine cigars. Orphaned at seven, uprooted from his second home by his grandfather's death, he found his third home with an uncle who managed his 400,000-mark estate and provided the "sheltered life." This early deprivation of parental affection is, psychologically, preparation for a desire beyond usual adult needs, for gratification of dependent and passive feelings.

The boy Hans was a daydreamer, hated active sports [29]; he clung to life's pleasures, as an infant to the breast, says Mann [30] in a significant figure of speech, showing his awareness of the trait and its dynamic origin. Exertion was something for which Hans saw no reason [32], and since he had no worthy object for his energies, had no robust vitality, his personality suffered a sort of palsy [32]. This state Mann calls being mediocre. Like the paradigm of such Mann-drawn men, THE DILETTANTE, Hans dabbled with water colors and enjoyed music inordinately. Finally, Hans was indolent, had easy fatigue (stigma of neurotic personalities); the family [34] arranged for avoidance of military duty and he drifted into engineering. He stayed in engineering from lack of incentive to change.

When Hans arrived at Davos-Dorf and Joachim said "Here's where you get out!" he was at what Joseph Conrad would have called the Shadow Line. Early youth was behind; the responsibilities and complexities of manhood ahead. Joachim is under no spell, sees clearly and says often that life "up here" is hateful and only to be endured until return to active life is possible. But Hans is ripe for failure; the easy life of the Sanatorium is inviting.

Quite early, not yet a patient, Hans tells Settembrini that he really feels fit only when doing nothing at all [60]; he says the best thing "up here" is lying down [70]. Settembrini, seeing that fateful "talent for illness" which the unscrupulous Dr Behrens will turn to mercenary advantage, tells Hans to leave at once [96], a warning which he is to repeat again and again, even after Hans is ill with the fever and soft-spot on the lung. His love of rest and passivity [103] makes Hans fight the unpleasant symptoms of 5,000-feet altitude; he will pay that price for ease, for those researches into past time which even a nosebleed affords [120]. Soon he enjoys palpitation, thinking of the sensuous patient, Clavdia [141]. He calculates that he can stay at the sanatorium for 12,000 francs a year, well within his income by inheritance. By this time he loves his easy-chair "more than all his previous existence" [164].

*Page references to the Lowe-Porter translation.

Pulmonary tuberculosis is a shocking personal tragedy. No reader can fail to be struck by Hans's lack of displeasure at being told he, too, is a patient; he has la belle indifférence of certain patients who resolve a conflict by developing a symptom. This is not to say that his fever and illness are entirely psychological; the author never answers that question. We do know his illness is not entirely organic, however.

Enjoying the well-ordered life, where everything is done for one and time for reflection is abundant, in his three more weeks, Hans shudders at the idea of return to the harsh, cruel life down below. Again, Settembrini, first-rate amateur psychiatrist, advises him to leave the mountain lest he be lost to life forever [199].

Established as a patient, Hans becomes infatuated with the idea and distant prospect of Clavdia [236-40], gets used to not being used to the altitude [241], and has time for humanism and literary talk and musing. He orders more cigars, buys medical books; Clavdia becomes the "image of life" in a strange sort of Castorpian humanism, which he devises, one that centers on the contemplation, not the pursuit, of woman. Only her last-minute encouragement leads to fulfillment of the dream on 29th February 1908, after seven months. This bit of action was helped by arrack punch, which, George Saintsbury observed, puts one on the rack the morning after.

Since Mann shifts the point of view away from Hans, we know nothing of his psychoanalysis by Dr Krokowski except that it took place in his second year. New studies, botany, astronomy [368], replaced medical sciences as books in his own field of engineering were put aside. New ideas, opposed to Settembrini's humanism, come with Leo Naphta, inquisitorial proponent of authority, discipline, and bloody martyrdom. The opposing lines of thought lead to the Great Confusion, for Hans in his cure-chair cannot decide whose view of man and the universe is "right." The wealth of ideas holds Hans to the mountain.

When Joachim decides to leave against medical advice, Hans is actually told by Behrens that he may go. He says he must stay until his cure is complete; he thinks of two more pressing reasons. He must stay because Clavdia will return, but most important, he must stay to "take stock" in his cure chair [421]. His philosophy is not yet complete. Behrens agrees to his staying. Hans tells his uncle that Behrens has advised six months more. Hans sees clearly what he is doing [440]. He attains freedom from the harsh world. After fourteen months at Davos, the "spell" and "enchantment" are complete. Psychologically, the story is over, except for the breaking of the enchantment in 1914, seven years after his arrival, by the entry of his country into World War I.

The dialectics, the vision in the snow, the death of Joachim, and Clavdia's return are parts of experience his ego craves. This objectivity comes to repel the woman [598]. His sexual experience is entirely contemplative and abstract except for the events of the 29th of February—by his twenty-fourth year of life experience in this field is over and done with.

After four years [625] Dr Behrens tells Hans he is not sure that tuberculosis is the cause of his continued fever; Hans is incapable of action. Solitaire, music, seances become now time-killers as the author now deliberately makes the reader lose track of time. Events leading to the summer of 1914 make no impression on Hans. By then [706] Hans is careless of his person, incapable of resolve, cold to deaths in his family; he has stopped using the calendar and the watch. He has not read a newspaper for seven years. His hypnotic enchantment seems permanent.

That we should find him packing his things and taking the train home to fight for Germany catches us by surprise. His motive is patriotic; his blood calls [712]. There is no hint that he means to find a way out of life, a way acceptable to society. No hint that, having attained the age of 30, he wishes to do what Ivan Karamazov threatened to do at 30, "dash the cup to the ground." Hans has found an act worthy of his effort at last, but one which may end in death. He had defeated death dialectically, as Hatfield turns the phrase, only to face it in war.

An apparently purple patch on music-appreciation earlior in the novel becomes significant. Hans goes into battle singing Franz Schubert's DER LINDENBAUM [715]. He sings it unaware of what he is singing as men do in moments of intense concentration, which means that psychologically it means nothing to Hans. It may mean much to Thomas Mann and to us.

The Linden Tree was the song Hans had played often on the gramophone [650-3] and in whose beauty he sensed death. He sensed death with misgiving, for he still retained enough of his integrity to see its error and to attempt "self-conquest." This conquest, this persisting integrity gave him the vigor to break the enchantment. As he sings the song unconsciously, with bayonet fixed, he carries us back to an idea he had once groped for at Davos [653] and which his creator had expressed, not without ambiguity: a higher view of humanity, transcending war and death, may result from his sacrifice. It predicts his untold fate.

One reads too much about Hans in his relation to death, about the sanatorium; parallel to this runs talk of "the artist." Hans is said to be an artist or almost one. Now if we can say that an artist—or any sensitive and intelligent young man—must learn to accept life through death, that statement does not make for psychological clarity. Its part in higher criticism is passed over. "Death" here should mean non-acceptance of life. For every sensitive person decides for himself two basic questions: Is life worth living? Is it better to be alive than to be dead? Facing these questions, probing for answers, widening one's experience does not make Hans or anyone else an artist. The artist objectifies his struggle and sets it down for literate readers, who are in turn sensitive, intelligent humans.

The Death-Instinct, credited to Freud, is something different—an unconscious drive toward death, a lifelong pattern of actions against one's best interests. I think Lord Jim exemplifies this. Hans does not.*

*Ed. note. At this point a substantial quotation from Dr. Ford's earlier paper on Lord Jim, referred to above, is called for.

"It will be remembered that Freud postulated two opposed instincts: the Life and the Death Instincts. The aim of the death-instinct is self-destruction, but not always immediate death. As an illustration Freud pointed out those characters in life who seem to be dogged by relentless ill-fortune but in reality bring it upon themselves. They accomplish this by acts unwittingly designed to push them toward destruction or harm. . . .

"Karl Menninger's study of the self-destructive instincts broadened their scope beyond that of Freud and indicated the balance between the life-loving and death-loving forces which prevents the full act of suicide but is not enough to turn in the proper direction the available instinctual forces. Jim illustrates this. For one thing he narrowly averted suicide immediately after the desertion of his ship. His immediate impulse was for punishment. For another his illusion of honor, his superior qualities, the feeling that with a clean slate and the right opportunity he would excel, all were in the balance against the impulse to destroy himself."

clear he enjoys the life he is leading, the life of contemplation, the life of Prufrockian self-care.

But if we grasp the neo-Freudian view of the death-instinct described by Franz Alexander (both Freud's and Alexander's may be valid concepts of human psychology), we find it is closely related to failure to achieve maturity, and we find a type of human nature fitting Hans Castorp's character. His failure to accept adult responsibilities is apparent to Clavdia, Settembrini, and Uncle James within the novel, and to the author, who freely comments upon it.

This new view of the death instinct implies a regression to earlier forms of gratification, and it is a partial regression. Hans attained the highest form of human activity intellectually; yet he failed. He was a "delicate child of life," emotionally unequal to adult living and requiring for happiness a constant feeding of his emotional life. Even taking stock was not without emotional meaning, a sort of pseudo-intellectual, self-deceptive activity. This partially adult and mature, Hans rejects maturity and finds a haven where his needs are satisfied without struggle, without action.

Thomas Mann with magnificent insight gives us the dynamic story of a man. Hoffman believes that Mann's familiarity with psychoanalysis came after THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN was written¹, so this intuitive psychology came from his knowledge of humanity, not of Freud. With familiar irony, Mann speaks of Hans's being in the state of sin, and if he is, it is the sin which Robert Browning (who gets too little credit for psychological insights) had in mind as he concluded The Statue and the Bust. The sin is "the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin," and the poem concludes:

You of the virtuo, (we issue join)
How strive you? Do to, fabula!

References

Franz Alexander: Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis, New York, Norton, 1948.

Franz Alexander: Psychosomatic Medicine, New York, Norton, 1950.

Frederick J. Hoffman: Freudianism and the Literary Mind, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1945.

Henry Hatfield: Thomas Mann, London, Peter Owen, 1952 (Later than the American edition, New Directions, 1951)

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1. Ed. note. Professor Hatfield made the same point in a recent lecture before the English Graduate Union at Columbia University.

BIBLIOGRAPHY (VIII)

First a correction. Dr. Kris's work, which appeared at the end of the bibliography in the last issue (Vol. II, No. 3, page 8), should have been listed as follows:

Ernst Kris, Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art, International Universities Press, 1952.

"Besides Dr. Kris's own papers," writes Mr. Fraiborg, "it has a bibliography which is of great interest to us." Mr. Fraiborg also calls attention to:

John Frosch (ed.) The Annual Survey of Psychoanalysis, International Universities Press, New York, 1952. The 1953 issue of this annual (Vol. I) contains a section on applied psychoanalysis, including Arts and Aesthetics, as well as a bibliography of books on psychoanalysis published during that year.

Mr. Parolhoff has called our attention to an unusual psycho-literary article:

Robert Graves, "Jung's Mythology," Hudson Review, Summer, 1952.

We should also call attention to the brilliant, although highly controversial, recent work by the eminent British psychoanalyst Dr. Glover:

Edward Glover, Freud or Jung, W. W. Norton, New York (originally published in England in 1950). The unusually pithy summaries of Freudian theory are, perhaps, of even greater interest to us than the systematic rebuttal of the theories of Jung's school. We call attention particularly to the chapter (10) on Art.

Professor Harry Blochower has an article on "Oedipus, Freud and Fromm" in the last (summer) issue of Complex. "The piece," he writes, "is part of a chapter in my work in progress on myth patterns in selected literary classics."

Professor Wayne Burns, of our Steering Committee, has published "Kafka and Alex Comfort: The Penal Colony Revisited" in Arizona Quarterly (Summer, 1952), Vol. 8, No. 2, pages 101-120. This excellent article clarifies Alex Comfort's novel (On This Side Nothing, Viking, 1949) by a systematic comparison with Kafka's In the Penal Colony, a comparison which sheds almost as much light on Kafka as it does on Comfort. Professor Burns refers to previous articles of his own dealing with Comfort:

"Milton and Alex Comfort," Interim, Vol. IV, No. 1, and

"The Scientific Humanism of Alex Comfort," The Humanist, Vol. XI, No. 6.

Additions to and Changes in Subscription List

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